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ABSTRACT

California State University, Fresno developed a comprehensive program to increase the number of minority students admitted into its teacher education program. The program, developed by the School of Education and Human Development (SOEHD), resulted from claims that the mandatory California Basic Educational Skills Test (CBEST) impedes and discourages qualified minority students from entering teaching. The program includes an early identification system that enables the SOEHD to identify students who intend to pursue teaching and provide them with information about taking the CBEST as early as possible. The program also includes advice for students, several alternative admission plans for students who have difficulty with the CBEST (e.g., conditional admission despite not yet having passed the CBEST), and diagnostic information. There are specially designed courses to further the basic skills of students who experience difficulty passing the CBEST. Data from 1996-97 indicate that the alternative admission program helped remove a principal barrier to admission for at least 51 percent of students who did not pass the CBEST in 1996-97. Data from 1994-97 showed that 70 percent of students who entered via alternative admissions plans passed the CBEST by the end of the semester. Data from the end of every school year suggest that the alternative admission plans and early identification system have successfully facilitated the admission of students who otherwise would have been denied admission due to low CBEST scores. (SM)

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COPING WITH THE CBEST:
ALTERNATIVE AND INCLUSIVE APPROACHES

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COPING WITH THE CBEST: ALTERNATIVE AND INCLUSIVE APPROACHES

Background of the Problem and Related Initiatives

Increasing the diversity of the teaching force is a high priority goal for universities and a critical factor in institutional efforts to integrate multiculturalism in all aspects of the schooling environment and process. California State University, Fresno has developed and implemented a comprehensive program which is increasing the number of minority students admitted into teacher education credential programs. This program is an effective recruitment and retention effort. It is also an initiative that addresses one of the subtle and frustrating barriers that minority students have experienced in their efforts to achieve their educational and career aspirations.

This program was initiated in response to pressing claims that a required type of standardized basic skills test, the "California Basic Educational Skills Test" (CBEST), impedes and discourages many qualified minority students from entering the teaching profession. Recent data collected from students attending California State University, Fresno who took the test show that 49 percent passed the test and 51 percent failed one or more of the subtests (Valencia, 1998). An examination of the names of students who failed the test show that the majority were from ethnic minority populations.

The test is mandated by the state credentialing agency as a prerequisite to obtaining a teaching credential. Many universities, including California State University, Fresno, require a passing score on the CBEST for full admission into a teacher education

credential program. While we are committed to maintaining quality standards to ensure that our graduates are sufficiently qualified to undertake a beginning teaching position, we are also cognizant of the need to explore alternative measures that prepare them to meet the necessary prerequisites for admission into teacher education credential studies. In this frame of reference, we require our students to provide evidence of having demonstrated acceptable competency levels in three areas of basic skills -- reading, writing, and mathematics (Valencia, A. A., Burch, B., & Price-Sharpes, Jana, 1994).

The "California Basic Education Skills Test" (CBEST) was designed to measure the proficiency level of teachers in three areas of basic skills--reading, writing, and mathematics. The passing score for the CBEST is 123 points, or 41 points for each subtest. However, the Commission on Teacher Credentialing allows a score of 37 for one subtest, provided that the overall score is not lower than 123 (National Evaluation Systems, Inc., 1996).

The program, conceptualized by a School of Education and Human Development (SOEHD) ad hoc committee in 1993, was fully implemented in 1994. It consists of several components which include an early identification system, related advisement, several alternative admission plans, and diagnostic information. The early identification system is intended to facilitate the recruitment of students into teacher education, and the alternative admission plans include specially designed courses to further the basic skills (reading, writing, and mathematics) of students who experience difficulty passing the CBEST. In addition to these provisions, a

monitoring and mentoring system is provided to encourage progressive development and successful outcomes among teacher education credential candidates.

Whereas the professional preparation of people to serve as teachers, administrators, and school counselors in public and private schools is, to a large extent, the principal responsibility of schools of education, we are also cognizant that other academic departments and support services in the university play a role in furthering the education of these students. Although the SOEHD took the lead in furthering these initiatives, the plans we conceptualized necessitated dialogue with and support from other university departments and service centers. For example, the University Learning Resource Center has been especially supportive in these endeavors.

The removal of the CBEST as one of the admission criterion components was often suggested to us as a quick and plausible solution in facilitating the admission of students who experience difficulty passing one or more of the CBEST subtests pertaining to basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics, but we felt that the complete exclusion of the test would pose two other significant problems. With accreditation reviews expected every five years, the removal of the test would have leave the School of Education and Human Development without an instrument or process to indicate student competencies in the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics. Philosophically, we also wanted to maintain the quality of our teacher education credential programs by ensuring that our teacher education candidates are sufficiently prepared in

these particular basic skills prior to placement in student teaching situations.

Irrespective of what is done concerning the CBEST requirement in terms of teacher education admission criteria, credential candidates would still have to pass the CBEST in order to be issued a teaching credential by the California Teacher Crendentialing Commission (CCTC) . Consequently, the ad committee recommended reference to other test instruments for determining the competency of teacher education applicants in three areas of the basic skills (reading, writing, and mathematics). While the CBEST would no longer be used as a singular instrument in determining the admission of students into teacher education credential programs, it would nevertheless serve as one of the principal references. This consideration was viewed as particularly important as long as the CCTC continues to require passage of the test prior to issuing teaching credentials. With this in mind, the ad hoc committee proposed the development and implementation of courses in three basic skills (reading, writing, and math) for students who have not passed the CBEST, including test-taking strategies and anxiety reduction approaches. These courses are currently offered on a credit/no-credit basis, and students are allowed to withdraw with no penalty if they pass the CBEST before the semester ends.

...Description of the Early Identification System and Alternative Admission Plans

The Early Identification System is especially designed to enable the SOEHD to identify all California State University, Fresno students who have indicated intentions to pursue careers in

teaching. This information is forwarded by the University Office of Admissions and Records to the Coordinator of the Alternative Admissions Plans and Early Identification System every semester. This service was implemented in the Spring Semester of 1994, and 1,408 students were mailed informational material (Valencia, A. A., 1994). The informational advises prospective teacher education students to take the CBEST as early as possible, to carefully read the information pertaining to all alternative admission plans, and to call the Coordinator for advisement if they have not passed or taken the CBEST -- especially if they have any questions pertaining to the CBEST and alternative admissions.

In addition to the names and addresses of all students who have indicated interest in teaching as a career and students who have selected teaching majors, the University Office of Admissions and Records provides the Coordinator of Alternative Admissions and Early Identification with the names, identification numbers, and addresses of students who are currently enrolled in a course entitled, Educ. 50: Introduction to Teaching, 1 semester unit of credit (Valencia, A. A. 1997). This course is an observational field-based (pre-requisite) offering for students who are considering the possibility of pursuing teacher education studies in a subsequent semester. The enrollment of students in this course is usually 200 to 250 per semester. Since most of the students who enroll in this course have already made a decision to pursue a career in teaching, it has become an important and pertinent reference in our early identification process.

In addition to the regular admission plan which requires passage of the CBEST along with other admission requirements, the SOEHD Dean and SOEHD Teacher Education Credential Program Committee accepted the ad hoc committee's recommendation to design and implement three alternative admission plans referred to as Alternative Admission Plans A, B, and C. The plans were implemented and refined during the Spring and Fall semesters of 1994 (Valencia, A. A. 1994). Specifically, Alternative Admission Plan A is designed to enable students to gain conditional admission into credential studies if they attain CBEST scores of 37 to 40 on the three subtests (reading, writing, and math) or two scores of at least 41 and one not lower than 33. Students who provide evidence of attaining either of these two combination of scores are allowed conditional admission into the teacher education credential program of their choice. The admission is conditional because they are required to take one or more courses in the basic skills relative to the CBEST subtest areas in which their lowest scores appear. They are also expected to pass the prescribed courses or the CBEST in order to qualify for admission into final student teaching.

The material and instruction in the SOEHD basic skills courses is not intended to test-driven, instead the emphasis is based on the particular needs of students with regard to the three areas of basic skills (reading, writing, and math) featured in the CBEST. In addition to the qualification of the instructors who have expertise in furthering the basic skills of adult students, the courses include reading and writing development activities, vocabulary building,

problem solving in mathematics, test-taking strategies, and reviewing standardized test formats.

The second plan, Alternative Admission Plan B, is designed to accommodate students with CBEST scores below the criterion scores for conditional admission through Alternative Admission Plan A. This plan enables these students to gain admission into the teacher education credential program of their choice by taking and passing one or more of the SOEHD basic skills courses. Alternative Admission Plan B differs from Alternative Admission Plan A in that students are not allowed to take teacher educational credential courses concurrently with the basic skills courses. The rationale for this requirement is based on the premise of ensuring that our students are able to demonsrate a minimum level of competency in two or three of the basic skills (reading, writing, and math) before being placed in an initial student teaching situation. Consequently, students who complete and pass the prescribed basic skills courses are expected to have sufficient competency in the basic skills prior to placement in student teaching and also to pass the CBEST by the time they complete the credential program (Valencia, A. A., 1994).

The third plan, referred to as Alternative Admission Plan C, is designed to allow conditional admission for students who have not passed the CBEST but have passed the selected standardized tests related the three basic skills. The tests proposed for this purpose were the ELM Test (Entry Level Mathematics), the EPT (English Proficiency Test), the UDWE (Upper Division Writing Exam), and the Nelson-Denny Reading Test. In this regard, students who have passed the CBEST reading subtest and provide evidence of having passed the

ELM test, the EPT or EDWE are allowed conditional admission into credential studies similar to students who qualify for conditional admission through Alternative Admission Plan A. Nevertheless, these students are advised to take one or more of the SOEHD basic skills courses in reference to their CBEST areas of need. Admission into final student teaching is allowed after they have either passed the prescribed basic skills courses or the CBEST (Valencia, A. A., 1994).

The Nelson-Denny Reading Test was explored in the Spring Semester of 1994 as a possible alternative admissions test for students who experience difficulty passing the CBEST reading subtest. Based on the minimum pass scores identified by the University Testing Center, data collected on this test in the Spring Semester of 1994 show that 6 out of 17 (35%) students who took the test passed it and were allowed admission in a teacher education credential program of their choice (Valencia, 1994). Irrespective of the results of this early exploratory period, students with a low score in the CBEST reading subtest have consistently elected to take the SOEHD basic skills reading course rather than the Nelson-Denny Reading Test.

Additionally, a computer program entitled, "Learning Plus Series in Basic Skills," was identified as an optional supplementary component to the basic skills courses offered by the SOEHD (Valencia, A. A., 1994). This program is designed to develop the necessary reading, writing, and mathematics skills that teacher education students will need in their professional work as teachers in public and private elementary schools. It includes diagnostic and

practice tests, as well as a management system (student data storage component) to automatically keep track of students' work and progress throughout the learning components. However, due to the unavailability of sufficient software and equipment, this program is provided to students only on a limited basis. Consequently, the basic skills courses offered by the SOEHD have been the most reliable option for students who experience difficulty passing the CBEST and who are seeking admission into a teacher education credential program of their choice.

Early Identification and Alternative Admission Outcomes

The Early Identification System has been exceedingly successful in contacting and encouraging students to take the CBEST as early as possible and to receive advisement on basic skills coursework that can facilitate their admission into teacher education credential programs. A total of 1,000 to 1,250 prospective teacher education students are contacted every semester based on university enrollment data. This process is expedited every semester when the University Office of Admissions and Records automatically forwards to the Coordinator of Alternative Admission and Early Identification Systems the names and addresses of prospective teacher education students identified through its computer processing system (Valencia, 1998).

Approximately five weeks after every CBEST testing session, the Coordinator of Alternative Admission Plans and Early Identification System also receives a list of university students who have taken the CBEST - - including information on those who passed the test and those who failed to attain passing scores on any

of the three subtests. This information, forwarded from the SOEHD Admissions Office, enables the Coordinator to identify students whose scores qualify them for conditional admission into a teacher education program through one of the alternative admission plans, and to note the names of students who should be advised to consider taking the SOEHD basic skills courses in terms of either Alternative Admission Plan A or Alternative Admission Plan B. This early information also gives students, who are experiencing difficulty passi g the test, ample time to enroll in the basic skills courses offered by the School of Education and Human Development.

Data collected in academic year 1996-97 show that between August 1996 and April 1997, a total of 2,984 students took the CBEST (Valencia, 1997). To specifically determine which students should receive information on alternative admission plans, the data were scrutinized and categorized in terms of three groups of students: (a) students who passed the CBEST, (b) students who did not pass the CBEST but attained scores of 41, 41, 33 or 37, 37, 37 (acceptable for conditional admission if all other admission requirements are met), and (c) students with low CBEST scores who did not meet the criterion scores for conditional admission. The compiled data show that 1,460 (49%) of the students passed the CBEST and 1,524 (51%) failed to attain a passing score on one or more of the subtests. In reference to the students who did not pass the CBEST, 148 (5%) attained scores of 41,41, 33 or 37, 37, 37 for possible conditional admission through Alternative Admission Plan A, while 1,376 (47%) were advised to enroll in basic skills courses through Alternative Admission Plan B (Valencia, 1997). These data

clearly show that the alternative admission program in the School of Education and Human Development has helped to remove one of the principal barriers for admission to teacher education for at least 51% of students who did not pass the CBEST in academic year 1996-97. The data for academic year 1997-98 has not yet been completely analyzed, but preliminary observations indicate relatively similar results.

Data provided by the School of Education Admissions Office show that between the Spring of 1994 and Spring of 1997, 70 percent of 114 students who were admitted into a teacher education credential program through Alternative Admission Plan A completed the admission plan and passed the CBEST by the end of the semester (Valencia, 1997). Further research is needed to precisely determine the percentage of students in both Alternative Admission Plan A and Alternative Admission Plan B who pass the CBEST by the time they graduate from the credential program of their choice. Based on reports from instructors of the three basic skills courses, the SOEHD Admissions Office, and the SOEHD Credential Analyst Office, we are able to estimate that the majority (over 90%) of the students who graduate from our teacher education meet all CCTC credentialing requirements. This means that the majority of the students who are admitted into our teacher education programs through both regular and alternative admission plans have passed the CBEST by the time they complete their final student teaching (Valencia, 1998).

Data collected and analyzed at the end of every academic year by the Coordinator of Alternative Admissions and Early Identification

System show that both alternative admission plans (A and B) and the early dentification system have been exceedingly successful in facilitating the admission of students into teacher education credential programs who otherwise would have been denied admission due to low CBEST scores (Valencia, 1998). At the same time, the alternative admission plans have assisted students to attain a given criterion level of competency in three areas of basic skills (reading, writing, and math). This particular provision is important because it gives students an acceptable level of competency in basic skills prior to being assigned to student teaching, and it also prepares them to pass the CBEST. Since credential candidates are required to pass the CBEST in order to be granted a teaching credential by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, our alternative admission plans are definitely helping them to become well-qualified and certified teachers.

Data collected in academic year 1996-97 show a definite relationship between the percentage of students who passed the ELM, EPT, and UDWE tests and the percentage from the group who passed the CBEST compared to the percentage of students who did not pass the test but passed the CBEST (Valencia, 1997). That is, the percentage of students who passed the CBEST is definitely higher for students who passed the tests.

Based on the number of students who responded to a questionnaire in a 1996-97 study conducted by the Coordinator of the Alternative Admission Plans and Early Identification System (Valencia, 1997), the data show that 36 (61%) out of 59 students

who did not pass one or more of the tests (ELM, EPT, and UDWE) took remedial courses in lieu of the tests. The data further show that the majority of students who took remedial math courses in lieu of the ELM passed the CBEST math subtest compared to students who did not take math remedial courses. Although a recent study by Valencia (1997) provides pertinent data on the effects of the three SOEHD basic skills courses in helping students pass the CBEST, further research is needed to determine the relative effects of other types of basic skills courses and workshops in enhancing the ability of students to pass the CBEST.

Concluding Statements

In the final analysis, our intention is to provide a greater number of viable alternatives for admission into our teacher education credential programs, coupled with qualitative dimensions that ensure progressive development among our candidates. We are confident that the early identification system and alternative admission plans we have designed and implemented will continue to facilitate admission into teacher education studies for a larger number of students. We also plan to continue monitoring the program to ensure that our teacher education credential candidates demonstrate appropriate levels of competency in the three aforementioned basic skills to enable them to secure admission into teacher education programs, to be accepted into our student teaching program, and to pass the CBEST by the time they complete a teacher education credential program at California State University, Fresno.

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